HOW IS YOUR GIVING SPIRITUAL?
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Mark 12:38-44

"…she out of her poverty has put in everything she had." Mark 12:44

I was reading up on the familiar story of the rich scribes and poor widow who gives her mite and happened on an essay that brought to memory something long forgotten. Armistice Day. [Peter Gomes, "Veterans and Stewards," *The Christian Century*, October 25, 1977] Are you old enough to remember Armistice Day? It's been renamed Veterans' Day: November 11. On the 11th day of the

11th month at the 11th hour in the year 1918, an armistice was signed at Versailles which brought to an end the First World War, a modern war that stunned the world with its ferocity and violence and monumental loss of life: “a war to make the world safe for democracy … a war to end all wars.” It was celebrated as Armistice Day until, in the passage of time, we fought several more wars.

But some of you may remember, as I do, that school was out on November 11th and there was a parade and in the parade were aging veterans of that conflict with their peculiar uniforms, knickers and field hats. At precisely 11:00 the most dramatic thing happened: the parade stopped. The bands and drums ceased playing and a strange and unusual silence descended. People standing in the crowd to watch the parade stopped talking, hushed their children. Some people bowed their heads. Even normally irreverent and irrepressible adolescent banter ceased.

And into that peculiar silence a lone trumpeter from each band in the parade played taps, and for one minute or so, we thought about those who had gone to France and had not come home. We thought as well about brothers and cousins and fathers and neighbors who had gone away, not so very long before, and died in France and Germany and Okinawa and Saipan: thought, that is to say, for one minute about sacrifice, about giving it all. At the end of the minute, the bands started up again, people began to talk, life went on.

That is the way it is with sacrifice – supreme sacrifice. There comes a moment, often without warning, a supreme moment of challenge and demand, when your true and most authentic self is required. It is not confined to the battlefield. It happens on the athletic field, classroom, board room, operating room. It happens quickly sometimes. What is now required is everything you've got and you can't really hold anything back; you either do it or you don't.

It’s a wonderful story, made more important by the fact that it is the last incident in Jesus’ public ministry. He’s in the Jerusalem Temple finally and he’s observing the scribes. The religious sophisticates and social elite are having an absolutely marvelous time parading around in the temple with their gorgeous linen robes elaborately embroidered and fringed. These same people absolutely love their public popularity – the way people rise when they enter a room, the way others hurry to greet them, shake hands and receive the blessing of their recognition, how they are always shown to choice seats in the

synagogue and at the meal table. These are stylish, elegant people.

And insofar as their privileged posturing is based on their religiosity, their piety, they are a caricature of the faith of his people which, after all, is based on notions of equal justice, fairness, love for all God's people. Besides, scribes like these seem to be a big city thing. You don't see scribes like these back in Galilee so, to the delight of his less urbane friends, he lets the scribes have it. "Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes. They devour widows' houses."

I think he and his friends are walking while all this is happening and now they are in the Court of Women where the thirteen large trumpet-shaped receptacles for the offerings of the faithful were located. It was an open invitation to ostentation.

We Presbyterians are private when it comes to money. Only God and the financial secretary's computer and, of course, the IRS, know how much we give. We Presbyterians cringe when we hear about the practice in some churches of publishing in the Sunday bulletin the exact amount of each member's contribution the previous week. The religion

of the temple was no less public when it came to donations. Well-to-do people calculated the percentage of their wealth they wished to give and when they made a pilgrimage to the temple, part of what they did was go to the Court of Women and deposit their gift. Watching it happen was entertaining. It was quite a display. There were, of course no checks, no stock transfers, not even offering envelopes. Money was in coin, so a big gift was big, heavy, noisy as the coins were hauled in and hoisted up and dumped into the receptacles. If there were paparazzi in the first century, they would be training their telephoto lenses on the purses and faces of

the rich and famous as they made their offerings.

And it is in the middle of that drama, that a poor widow makes her way to the receptacles and drops in two small copper coins – the smallest coin available. It is all she has and she gives it all.

> “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had.”

Well, all right. But if you care about the bottom line, if you're the chair of the Stewardship Campaign, or the Capital Campaign at the museum, and you've set an ambitious goal, this is becoming a fund raising nightmare. It's nice to have the widow's penny, but if you're going to make the goal you have to have those leadership gifts – you must have those who "contribute out of their abundance."

At this point this could become superficial. The scribes are too easy a target. The temple had to have generous contributors for its maintenance. I don't think Jesus opposed that. What he did find appalling was institutional religion that had strayed from its fundamental purposes. What he found appalling was the privileged elitism based on his religion and what he found inspiring and encouraging was the extravagance of this one, this eloquent reminder of the beauty and glory and truth of his religion, this poor widow giving everything she has.

But there is also something slightly unsavory going on here, by the way. Remember Jesus' warning that the "scribes devour widows' houses?" Well, there is some evidence that the scribes were doing just that. The practice was called "scribal trusteeship." Women were not regarded as competent to manage their deceased husband's affairs. A widow had to have someone to help, a scribe who was retained to administer the assets for which he was paid a percentage. The practice was notorious for embezzlement and abuse. [See Chad Myers, *Bind the Strong Man*, p. 520]

That's what made Jesus so angry. It was a fundamental tenet of Judaism that widows and orphans were to be protected and cared for. Yet here they were, victims of the system designed to help them, exploited by the powerful, their paltry resources actually ending up in the purses and accounts of the wealthy.

One of the important books last year was *Angela's Ashes*, by Frank McCourt, a best-seller. McCourt, a school teacher and writer in New York, has written a gripping account of his childhood in Limerick, Ireland.

“When I look back on my childhood, I wonder how I managed to survive at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.” [p. 11]

McCourt is very critical of the church in his book. His father is a hopeless alcoholic who cannot and will not keep a job and spends every penny he can get at the pub. His mother has no money to feed her children – two of whom die. McCourt is cold, hungry most of the time, often in charge of his younger siblings while his mother is sick, dependent on what she can get at the St. Vincent de Paul Society. The church doesn't help much, is often part of the heavy, oppressive structure from which there is no escape and McCourt is bitter. In one very poignant incident, his father has taken a gift of five pounds, sent by his father in the north,

to buy milk for the new baby. Frank's job is to look in all the Limerick pubs to find his father and persuade him to come home with whatever money is left. He's very hungry. In one pub he finds a drunken man, not his father, passed out with his fish and chips spilled on the floor. McCourt steals the food, sticks it under his coat and takes it outside to eat it, and then, being Irish, feels guilty and stops in a church to confess.

> "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned; it's a fortnight since my last confession." I tell my usual sins

and then, “I stole fish and chips
from a drunken man.”

“Why, my child?”

“I was hungry, Father.”

“And why were you hungry?”

“There was nothing in my belly, Father.”

He says nothing and even though
it’s dark I know he’s shaking his
head. “My dear child, why can’t

you go home and ask your mother for something?”

“Because she sent me out looking for my father in the pubs. Father, I couldn’t find him and she hasn’t a scrap in the house because he’s drinking the five pounds Grandpa sent from the north for the new baby and she’s raging by the fire because I can’t find my father.”

I wonder if this priest is asleep because he’s very quiet until he says, “My child, I sit here. I hear the sins of the poor. I assign the penance. I bestow absolution. I should be on my knees washing their feet. Do you understand me, my child?”

I tell him I do, but I don’t.

“Go home, child. Pray for me.”

“No penance, Father?”

“No, my child.”

“I stole the fish and chips. I’m doomed.”

“You’re forgiven. Go. Pray for me.”

He blesses me in Latin, talks to himself in English and I wonder what I did to him.”
[p. 184-5]

The incident of the scribes and the widow is first of all about religion that has forgotten its purpose, forgotten its mission, forgotten its

Lord. For those of us privileged to live here, to worship here, to be the church here, it is a reminder of our duty, God's expectations, our purpose. It is a reminder that while our salvation is given to us as a gift, our integrity as disciples of Jesus is a product of our mission, and without it we have no integrity, no right to be here. It is a reminder that our mission to the city is the heart of his enterprise, the way we communicate the truth of the Gospel.

And the incident is a personal invitation to a radical extravagance as we live out our faith; a powerful cultural dynamic is save, hoard,

store it up for a rainy day – whatever it is, money, love, energy, passion. Mostly you and I are not radically extravagant about anything. Mostly we are cautious, prudent. We carefully calculate what we can give, how much we can care. We may smile approvingly of the generosity of this poor widow, but never in our lifetime have we done anything like that – emptied our pockets, poured out our hearts for love.

I've been doing a little reading about leadership recently. I've been asked to write an essay for a church publication about what religious leadership looks like so I decided to

catch up with what the corporate gurus are thinking and saying these days: Peter Drucker, Max Dupree. And I'm constantly amazed at how theological the corporate consultants are and how, almost without exception, their conclusions about leadership are positively sermonic.

In one book, *Leading With Soul*, the authors present their case through the experience of a highly successful, hard-driving executive, Steve Camden. But all is not well. He's on a treadmill, running faster and faster, getting farther and farther behind. He has tried everything: better time management, a

mission statement, strategic planning, training, a Total Quality Management Seminar. He reads all the books and magazines, *Business Week*, *Fortune*, *Harvard Business Review*.

Steve Camden's malaise is not uncommon, say the authors. He is suffering from what Albert Schweitzer once referred to as a "sleeping sickness of the soul." It's symptoms are loss of seriousness, enthusiasm and zest. "It happens when individuals live superficially, pursue no goals deeper than material success." [p. 38]

The authors, university professors and business consultants, write that what is needed is a new paradigm of leadership, or – more accurately – rediscovering of an old paradigm. What this man most needs as a leader and a human being is to learn how to give his life away. “Leading,” they say, “is giving the gift of yourself.”

They put it grandly,

> “Your quest as a leader is a journey to find the treasure of your true self, and then to return home to give your gift to help transform

> your kingdom and in the process, your whole life." [Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Leading With Soul*, p. 102]

Who among us has not withheld our money, our time, our heart, our love and then later regretted it? Who hasn't felt the heart tug of passion and corrected it with reason and common sense? Who hasn't wanted to buy a dozen roses but settled for three? Who hasn't heard the call to commitment, sacrifice, generosity, but found some better, more sensible rationale for prudence and caution?

We miss something of the miracle of life when we do that. We miss the essence of faith. We miss, in fact, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The widow's mite. She gave all she had.

I have a mite. I've kept it since it was given to me in my freshman year of college. It's a dime, actually. It's scotch-taped to a crude note typed by someone not familiar with a typewriter. There are lots of misspelled words and not much punctuation. It's from my little brother. The note says,

Dear Johnny,

I’m sorry you’re out of money. Here’s some of my allowance. (His weekly allowance was, I recall, fifty cents.) Tell me if you need more.

Love,

Billy

The widow's gift – all she had – is, of course, a symbol of the prelude to that most amazing gift ever given: the life of Jesus which we believe was the life of God as well. What she gave reminds us that for our sakes, for our wholeness as human beings, for our salvation, he gave his all, his life.

Her gift is a reminder that you and I live in that grace. Her story is an invitation to that radical extravagance.

What holds us back? What prevents us from giving ourselves? Is it fear? Lack of courage? Or is it because we have never truly heard

the clear summons of Jesus Christ: to find our lives by losing them for his sake?

So – why not? Why not open your hands, your arms, your spirit, your heart? Why not become radically extravagant in your living, your work, your relationships; your love for your dearest ones? Why not – the adventure of following where Jesus Christ leads?

Amen.

O God, in Jesus Christ you have poured out love and life, and shown us not only who you are but who we could become. Give us courage to live with that radical extravagance in all our days, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.